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ABSTRACT

Throughout its history, the U.S. system of higher learning has been a major influence in the building of a democratic and industrialized United States, and it has provided educational programs to help all classes of citizens improve themselves through learning. Today, the United States is no longer an industrializing nation, and the relevance of higher education is in danger of diminishing. As the United States becomes a technological, automated, information-based society, communication is replacing production as the most important factor in the economy. Higher education has a structure well-adapted to meet a clear set of national needs, but those needs are no longer top national priorities. Major realignments will be necessary. The most important change will be in the nature of the student body served by higher education. In the information age, almost everyone is a student, and adult learners will be an ever more important factor in U.S. higher education. Continuing education programs are a crucial means for the dissemination of new information, and they are among the few reliable means for maintaining professional competence in a world of rapid change. By their structure and fundamental tenets, continuing education programs have a primary focus on learning as a lifelong process that will make them natural coordination points between colleges and students who choose to keep working for a degree after launching a career. (SLD)

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TRADITION, TRANSFORMATION, AND TOMORROW

The Changing Role of Continuing Education

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TRADITION, TRANSFORMATION, AND TOMORROW:

The Emerging Role of American Higher Education

by Howard Sparks

NATIONAL UNIVERSITY
CONTINUING EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

OCCASIONAL PAPER 2

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HIGHER EDUCATION'S CHALLENGE

Today, American higher education is facing the most profound challenge in its history.

The emerging student majority in higher education—the working, adult, part-time student—is forcing fundamental changes in everything from student billing procedures to faculty promotion criteria, and these changes challenge higher education with serious questions about the extent to which colleges and universities can change without losing their traditional identities.

History argues compellingly that the best guarantee of future success lies in a continuation of the tradition of the past—a higher educational tradition that is often misunderstood. An honest look at the history of America's colleges and universities assures that our best future will be realized by a continued devotion to the American higher education tradition of adaptation, modification, and transformation in response to changing national agendas. It is within that tradition that continuing education has typically been the most responsive unit of the University.

THE DEEP TRADITION: COMMITMENT TO NATIONAL GOALS

For more than three hundred years, American colleges and universities have collectively and successfully developed themselves by responding to our national goals and priorities. Those institutions which have failed to adapt to the changing social and economic priorities of our nation have, by and large, become obscure or non-existent. Conversely, those institutions which have chosen aggressive and imaginative methods of aligning themselves with our national purposes and policies have, on the whole, emerged successful, emulated, and influential, not only within higher education but also within the broad functioning of America's socioeconomic system. Success has accrued to those institutions willing to make themselves contributors toward the accomplishment of our country's major national goals. This process goes back to the very inception of American higher education.

During the earliest days of European settlement in North America, an overwhelming colonial priority was the development of leadership, and the primary purpose of our earliest colleges was to institutionalize a method for preparing Americans to assume responsible office. In New England, Puritan policy emphasized separation from the corruptions of degenerate Britain and its depraved Church. Thus, according to **New England's First Fruits** (1643), the Massachusetts General Court's real reason for establishing Harvard College in 1636 was less a noble wish to "advance *learning* and perpetuate it to posterity" than a practical intent to train new Puritan leaders so as not to "leave an illiterate Ministry to the Churches when our present Ministers shall lie in the dust."

The commitment to make higher education serve as the cradle of leadership for the colonial and early federal era brought obvious success. Colleges sprang up rapidly. Almost the instant that settlers would breach a frontier, a college would appear, intent on supplying church and territory with "sober, virtuous, industrious citizens" to direct its future.

By the 1840's and 1850's, however, America's national priorities were changing radically. The steam engine of industrialism befouled Jefferson's pastoral agrarianism. Railroads, canals, and factories supplanted plantations and tradesmen's shops as the true symbols of American economy. The rude vision of Jacksonian democracy overwhelmed the patrician republicanism of Madison and Monroe. Public policy debates focused on banking and credit, transportation and distribution, labor and immigration, and other questions critically important to rapid industrialization and modern economic development. But these were questions about which leaders trained in classical colleges were no better equipped to comment than the unschooled frontiersmen of Tennessee or Illinois. Admirably equipped to prepare clergymen, teachers, lawyers, merchants, and planters with the rhetorical skills and *theological* training essential to public life since the Renaissance, the colleges provided little help for a nation entering an era of freewheeling industrial capitalism unprecedented in Cicero or Calvin.

Not surprisingly, new leaders arose for higher education. Francis Wayland, in his 1850 **Report to the Brown Commission**, told Brown College that the whole system needed to modernize itself. Colleges needed two basic changes. First, they had to expand their social commitment. Higher education should serve "not for the benefit of one class, but for the benefit of all classes." In keeping America's democratic realities, Wayland said, colleges should offer studies not only for the affluent but also for the middle and lower classes emerging from the new industrialism. Second, colleges

needed an expanded curriculum. Science, "which alone can lay the foundation of eminent success in the useful arts," should be on an equal footing with the classical curriculum.

At Harvard the redoubtable Charles W. Eliot established the "elective system" which, by offering undergraduates a choice of subjects, opened the possibility of a truly democratic higher education. At the University of Michigan, insisting that the country needed "all the intelligence, all the trained minds we can have," James B. Angell argued for broad, tax-based, public support for higher education.

At Johns Hopkins, Daniel Coit Gilman led the final, successful effort to establish the German university model in America, thus placing research (especially scientific research with its utility for economic and technological progress) on an equal footing with teaching. And at Cornell, pre-eminent among the early institutions to benefit from Senator Morrill's use of federal land grants to found colleges that would "teach such branches of learning as are related to agriculture and the mechanic arts . . . in order to promote the education of the industrial classes," Andrew D. White helped form a curriculum combining traditional liberal education with scientific and technological instruction.

In fact, during the generation following the Civil War, hundreds of academic leaders were seized by the vision of a democratic America in which industry guaranteed prosperity for all, and they further altered American higher education to make it an even stronger element in the accomplishment of our national priorities. They changed the colleges and universities, expanding the colonial tradition of leadership training by making higher education more democratic, more scientific, and more supportive of American industry.

During the century that has passed since Eliot, Gilman, White and their contemporaries, American higher education has grown and prospered by continual realignment in response to our nation's changing social and economic priorities.

Some of higher education's most remarkable accomplishments, for instance, have grown from the on-going commitment to democratize higher education. In 1909, the City College (now University) of New York began its evening program, allowing the sons and daughters of immigrant families to hold full-time jobs while pursuing their ambitions to learn and to advance. At the University of Wisconsin, the "Wisconsin idea" was born during the early 1900's, creating university extension and continuing education pro-

grams to provide rural populations with higher educational services, both credit and non-credit.

In the same spirit of expanding democracy, when the GI's returned from World War II, colleges all over the country expanded to accommodate them, despite their marked difference from conventional college students. By the 1950's, adult students had ceased to be rarities, especially at urban universities, and some colleges even began to build programs in which age—like sex, race, and religion—should cease to be a barrier to higher education. During the 1960's and 1970's, American colleges aggressively carried out the nation's equal opportunity and affirmative action commitments as part of higher education's century-long support for national policies of democracy and social equality.

THE CURRENT PROBLEM

There is good reason to believe, however, that the relevance of modern higher education is in danger of diminishing. Historically, the American system of higher learning has been a major influence in the building of a democratic and industrialized America, and it has provided educational programs to help all classes of citizens improve themselves through learning.

Today, however, the United States is no longer an industrializing nation. The entire world is now riding a new wave of historical development, and this new wave is raising a wake of change that is both profound and dramatic. As a result, American goals and priorities are shifting more rapidly and profoundly than they have since the agrarian and republican ideals of the Founding Fathers gave way to the industrial and democratic developments of the nineteenth century.

That America is becoming a complex information society is apparent in the current restructuring in our economic policies and social institutions.

Our century-long commitment to industrialization is being replaced by an emphasis on technology and automation. American industrial workers, for instance, are currently experiencing profound displacement as the means of production refocus around new technologies and distribution systems. Manufacturers are leaving their old factories and building new ones that use computers, lasers, and robots to do work that until recently could only be done by men and women. Today it is more efficient, more productive, and, in the long run, more humane to use computers and robots to do our labor than to use people; it is wiser to train people to control machines than to let people do hard, dirty, and dangerous work. Thus, despite some

serious side effects, old fashioned industry is yielding to the newer technologies, and the nation is realigning its priorities. America will become a technological, automated, information-based society. Like it or not, the nation is already deeply committed to this goal.

This basic change implies other changes almost equally important. It means communication replaces production as the most important factor in the economy. Production has ceased to be an end in itself. In an economy where computers and robots do the actual labor of producing goods—gross production becomes a by-product of the effectiveness of its control system.

Furthermore, in an information economy, the concepts of capital and investment take on new dimensions. No longer can decision-makers define capital as the money and property used in running a business. They must recognize that people are a major—in many cases, *the* major—capital in the economy of society's most critical institutions. In the industrial system, management focused on the forge, the furnace, and the factory building as the critical points in the economy of the firm; people could be readily hired, trained, and replaced. The monthly or weekly payroll was a production cost, not a capital outlay or an investment. Not now! The more sophisticated technology becomes, the more rigorous are its demands on both its operators and its managers. Private corporations and government agencies alike, therefore, must demand and must pay for training and education. People, as possessors of the training and education necessary for a highly technological economy, become a major investment; they cease to be a feature of the production process, and become a strategic resource. Their needs must be addressed in the long-range planning process. No portion of American life has been unaffected by this shift away from an industrial democracy and toward a society based on technology, information, and communication.

THE CHALLENGE OF THE FUTURE

Thus, higher education faces essentially the same challenge it confronted in the 1850's. We have a structure that is marvelously well adapted to meet a clear set of national needs, but the time is past when those needs are top national priorities. Other goals have emerged as more important, more basic to the continued health of the nation. Higher education can respond to those new priorities, but it has to change as it does. In fact, because the emerging information age places an even greater emphasis on education

than did the industrial era, there is every reason to believe that colleges and universities, America's research and education institutions *par excellence*, will need to move into an even more crucial position than they have held in the past. But they cannot do so without substantially modifying their present structures. The future well-being of the United States depends upon higher education's ability to re-structure itself for the new age.

Just as the American colleges of the 1840's had to modify themselves dramatically in order to address the needs of the 1870's, so also will the colleges of the 1980's need to reconfigure in order to become the institutions which society will need in the twenty-first century.

Some basic trends seem clear enough to make it possible to conjecture where major realignments of our universities must begin. The most important change—one that is already in progress at many institutions—will be in the nature of the student body served by higher education. Just as the institutions of the 1850's had to evolve away from restricting their programs to white, upper-class males with a future in the church, law, medicine, the plantation, or banking, so now must they let go of the idea that students are 18–24 years old and preparing to enter careers in management or one of the professions.

In the information age, almost everyone is a student; no one can afford to stop learning at age 24. The facts are already clear. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 5 million part-time students, most of them adults, are currently enrolled in college degree programs. They contribute 40 percent of the total student body of American colleges, a growth of approximately 150 percent since 1966. The College Board predicts that by 1990, almost half (48 percent) of the students registered in degree programs will be part-time students. Students, in other words, have already ceased to be youths. Many of them certainly are, but close to half of them are already adults with families, community obligations, and—above all—established careers.

These students do not come to school seeking preparatory studies for entry into the world. They seek education as part of their career development and as a way of changing the world. In virtually every study ever made of adult students, career development emerges as the overwhelming motive for returning to college. Moreover, 10 million people a year register for non-credit educational programs at American colleges, mostly in professional continuing education in law, engineering, the health professions, business, and other career fields. Non-credit programming has grown by

almost 60 percent since the mid-1960's, and the College Board projects that number will double before the year 2000.

This phenomenal growth in non-traditional continuing education is a direct result of the socioeconomic changes alluded to earlier. As the pace of technological development quickens, professionals' needs for new knowledge and skills likewise quickens. The traditional classroom and curriculum have been unable to keep up; consequently, continuing education units have responded to these unfulfilled needs by developing fast-paced, accessible, critical educational programming, thus meeting immediate needs and allowing the traditional programs of colleges the time to modify curriculum and delivery modes.

In other words, adult learners are an acceleratingly important factor in American higher education. According to all research, they return for more education because of such career-related factors as job obsolescence; job competition from better trained workers; the necessity for more education in order to advance; and other factors that correlate closely with the changing nature of work.

American higher education must reconfigure its organizational patterns to meet the needs of this emerging adult majority. Dormitories and student unions, of course, need not be torn down; younger students aren't going to disappear any more than affluent white males disappeared from colleges when women, blacks, and lower-income students became major parts of the student body. But colleges will have to go much farther than most have yet gone if they wish to meet the needs of this new populace.

A very important trend is the shifting pattern of corporate and governmental influence on curriculum. Higher education is becoming increasingly aware of the need to listen to companies when it considers the development of programs, and the old system of the curriculum committee made up entirely of departmental faculty is already fading. Digital Equipment Corporation and International Business Machines, two giants of the computer industry, recently agreed to pay the Massachusetts Institute of Technology 50 million dollars in equipment and services in return for a truly computerized curriculum; IBM and Digital, in other words, are now explicit factors in the design of a major institution's instructional and degree-granting process. Interestingly, when corporations and government agencies have *not* been able to get effective cooperation from higher education, they have simply set up their own institutions, complete with degree granting paraphernalia, research laboratories, and faculty officers. Hamburger University, the McDonald's fast-food training center, is seeking approval to grant

associate degrees. Wang Laboratories, a computer firm, through its Wang Institute, has been granting master's degrees in software engineering since 1979. The Community College of the Air Force operates the largest accredited degree-granting program in the world, and the Department of Agriculture has its own Graduate School. Competition for students is forcing colleges to recognize that corporations and agencies must, in their own interest, spend billions of dollars annually to keep their human capital up to date. It is no wonder that some reputable institutions are building aggressive programs to work with corporate sponsors to provide an effective education for their employees. Many such programs will develop in the future, and continuing higher education will play the critcal role. There are three reasons why this is so.

First, continuing education programs are a crucial means for the dissemination of new information. As centers of expertise and learning in various fields, colleges and universities stay on the forefront of knowledge. Through conferences, short courses, media courses, and a variety of other mechanisms, continuing education programs spread knowledge and information into the community. As society becomes increasingly reliant upon information in its decision-making, the need for current information will increase, and the importance of continuing education will grow.

Second, continuing education programs are among the few reliable means for maintaining professional competence in a world of rapid change. In the world of the twenty-first century, professional practice in all fields—accounting, real estate, engineering, nursing, and so on—will be changing rapidly as new information, new technologies, and new practices evolve. In such a world, professional competence must be maintained through continual re-education; it is the only means to avoid a loss of effectiveness. Colleges and universities maintain large staffs of professional faculties whose job it is to know and teach the most current practices in their fields. Those faculties are the obvious and natural reservoir of expertise for continuing professional education in the future.

Third, continuing education programs by their very structure and most fundamental tenets have a primary focus on learning as a lifelong process. They will, therefore, serve as natural coordination points between colleges and the growing number of students who choose to continue working toward a degree after launching themselves into a career. For such students, non-traditional learning methods—such as media instruction using computer assistance, video-discs, or telephone linkages—will be increasingly important and increasingly practical. Continuing education programs will,

therefore, become more and more important as mediators between adult students with a desire to learn and faculties with a mission to teach.

In this environment of accelerating social and economic change, it is obvious that American higher education not only must change but is changing. The only real questions concern how rapid the process of change will be. At some places it will be slow. Most of the people now working in colleges and universities are fundamentally committed to the old, industrial-era ideals of the university. They strongly believe that higher education has been doing extraordinary work in unlocking the secrets of nature and of human behavior, and they want it to continue to contribute to the progress of the nation and the world. It can—in fact, it must—continue to do so in the future. But American colleges cannot continue in the same old ways. They must change, for the world around them is changing.

American colleges already have within them the necessary resources to adapt smoothly to the new world. All they need is to reconfigure their organizations to take advantage of the talents already there. Most institutions, for instance, have adult and continuing education administrators who understand the increasingly important needs of adult students; universities need only use them effectively in decision-making. Most institutions also have computer centers and instructional design specialists who know a great deal about the technical and the behavioral aspects of media instruction and electronic research; they must be given more prominence in academic planning. And most colleges have continuing education and institutional development specialists who coordinate with corporate and governmental bodies regarding special programs that should be brought in from the periphery of the institution to play a more central role. Done intelligently, these needed changes can be accomplished easily. Done poorly, they can disrupt major research and instructional programs. Not done at all, they are likely to leave some institutions out of the mainstream of academic development.

The real key, therefore, to the immediate future of higher education lies in the hands of the leadership in America's colleges and universities. During the 1860's, colleges produced scores of men and women who actively embraced the emerging American priorities of democracy and industrialization. They envisioned a new kind of higher learning to serve the new day dawning in America. They helped their colleges to take the difficult steps of expanding student bodies to include new classes of people, of extending the curriculum to include new classes of subject matter, and of

adding science and service and research into the fundamental mission of higher education.

A similar task confronts the current leaders of American higher education. They must recognize that the future is bright with promise, if they choose to make it bright. Robots can save lives; computers can relieve drudgery; satellites can open whole new vistas of knowledge. With the resources available to it, higher education can lead the way in making America's future positively human and humane; colleges can help not merely to train but to educate the people who will control the technology. Higher education must commit itself to the priorities of a new age, must embrace the vision of a new era, and must work to make it as good as it can and should be.

Will the leadership of higher education be able to have that vision? Will it be able, as were the leaders of a century ago, to help realign higher education in support of the new priorities?

The answer, of course is *yes*. History proves it. In the past, when priorities have emerged, American higher education has been in the thick of their realization. In the future, as education becomes even more important, America's colleges and universities will continue to realign and reconfigure to meet new priorities. The American democratic experiment continues. It is the American tradition!

Howard Sparks is Vice Provost for Continuing Studies & Public Service at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond. He has written and lectured extensively about adult education and served on several state and national education advisory panels.

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